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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 LIBREVILLE 000368

SIPDIS

AF/C FOR LISA KORTE

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TAGS: [ECON](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [GB](#)

SUBJECT: GABON: ELECTION MISCELLANY

Classified By: Ambassador Eunice Reddick for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

SUMMARY

1. (C) As Gabon enters into an unprecedented period in its history, Gabonese politics also struggles to define the norms for the first truly unpredictable political landscape in 41 years. New election tactics like the use of short messaging services (SMS) and billboards are prompting local debate. The Gabonese Government, once known for its stability, is on its third round of major governmental shakeups since the death of Omar Bongo) with at least one more on the way after the August 30 election. Even the presidency, normally the first and last word on all things politic in Gabon, is showing weakness as Interim President Rogombe has futilely tried to prevent the campaigns of the presidential hopefuls from starting while allowing Ali Bongo to hijack official functions for his own campaign. END SUMMARY.

INTERIM PRESIDENT PUBLICALLY NOTES THAT THE CAMPAIGN HAS NOT YET BEGUN) NO ONE LISTENS

2. (C) On July 31 Interim President Rose Francine Rogombe publicly reminded the 23 presidential candidates that "The campaign for the presidency has not yet started." The "official" campaign cycle begins August 16 and lasts until the day before the election. Rogombe's announcement was made against the backdrop of all 23 candidates making very public appeals to their voters, including Minister of Defense and PDG nominee Ali Bongo Ondimba. Already, candidates and their supporters are reported to be handing out bags of rice, bottles of beer, and shirts with the pictures of the candidates to the population of villages in the interior of the country as well as some of the outlying areas of Libreville.

THE CAMPAIGN HAS NOT YET OFFICALLY STARTED) UNLESS YOU ARE ALI BONGO

3. (C) Chinese Ambassador Li Fushun told the Ambassador she was surprised that a road groundbreaking ceremony she participated in turned into a campaign rally, with Interim President Rose Rogombe officiating no less. The Ngounie province road project is being funded by an African Development Bank loan and will be carried out by China Communications Construction Company. The Chinese Ambassador knew that the Interim President would be participating in the groundbreaking, however, the Vice President, Prime Minister and many other ministers also attended, including Minister of Defense and ruling PDG presidential candidate Ali Bongo. The audience was replete with chanting women in outfits emblazoned with Omar Bongo's photo. The Interim President

was warmly welcomed by the audience but the dignitary who received the loudest and longest cheer was candidate Ali Bongo. The Chinese Ambassador said she did not expect to be part of a PDG rally, but took it all in stride. She noted that Minister of Territorial Management and independent candidate Pierre Claver Maganga Moussavou was visibly chagrined by the reception for Ali Bongo.

CAMPAIGN ADVERTISEMENTS NOW DIGITAL

14. (C) Mobile phone customers in Gabon are receiving electronic short messaging service (SMS) campaign statements. The use of SMS and mobile phones is a new development in Gabon, and is coming under heavy scrutiny by the public. Many Gabonese are unhappy with the use of SMS for campaigning. They are raising questions about how their phone numbers were acquired by the candidates, and how the SMS campaign advertisements are being paid. Users of Zain mobile phones received an SMS from Ali Bongo Ondimba's campaign. There have also been unconfirmed reports of pro-Fang ethnic group SMS solicitations (there are four prominent Fang candidates) former PM Eyeghe-Ndong, former Interior Minister Mba Obame, former Vice Prime Minister Mba Abessole, and former Mining Minister Oye Mba).

YET ANOTHER LIST OF MINISTERS

15. (U) Gabon, once known for its governmental stability under
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the leadership of Omar Bongo Ondimba, has announced three significant changes to the government in less than two months. On June 11 a new set of Ministers were selected and shuffled after the ascension of Interim President Rose Francine Rogombe. On July 23 a new list was published after former Prime Minister Jean Eyeghe Ndong stepped down and new Prime Minister Paul Biyoghe Mba installed his government. The most recent reshuffle occurred on July 31, and involved a number of provincial representatives being replaced and individuals from the Lambarene region (the home of the Interim President) being added to the governmental rosters. With the election of a new president on August 30, another round of reshuffles will occur within a few weeks marking at least the fourth significant shift in governmental personnel since Omar Bongo's death.

BILLBOARDS FORBIDDEN, TORN DOWN

16. (C) The Libreville Mayor's office has recently decided not to allow the use of billboards for campaigning. Embassy contacts say that the ruling comes down as a result of plans by independent candidate Andre Mba Obame to use his extensive media holdings to promote his run for the presidency. Mba Obame's companies own a number of billboards in Libreville and there were plans for his advertisements to go up, but the mayor's office has decided that billboards cannot be used to promote candidates. Besides forbidding the use of billboards in the campaign, the City of Libreville identified a series of "illegal" billboards that it is now removing. Not coincidentally, embassy contacts tell us, these "illegal" billboards are owned by Mba Obame. Local broadcast media has reported that contrary to the statements by the Mayor's office, the billboards were legally licensed and their removal is entirely politically motivated.

Secret Voter Registration?

17. (C) Presidential candidate Pierre Mamboundou has

repeatedly and openly said that that the Gabonese Government is sponsoring "secret" voter registrations. Mamboundou claims that because the lines were long during the public voter registration period, the government is now allowing PDG sympathizers who did not register to do so secretly and well after the close of the registration period. Mamboundou has also raised concerns that non-Gabonese with PDG sympathies are being allowed to register.

COMMENT

18. (C) There is no doubt that the contest for the presidency is in full-swing. Gabon is experiencing a period of anomie, where the normal rules of the political game no longer apply. Without the leadership and oversight of Ali Bongo tactics and methods that would have been considered "off-limits" are now being explored by the PDG and opposition alike as they jockey for advantage. Mamboundou,s complaints of malfeasance on the part of the PDG are nothing new and will be a reoccurring theme to his campaign. END COMMENT.

REDDICK